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PP RUEHAST RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHLA RUEHMRE RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHAH #0169/01 0400618
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 090618Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8359
INFO RUCNOSC/OSCE POST COLLECTIVE
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1833
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0576
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0630
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT 5022
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1238
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC//J5/RUE//
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL//CCJ2/HSE/GCJ5//
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0449

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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY); INL (BUHLER); SCA/PPD (KAMP)
TASHKENT FOR DEA (CORTINOVIS)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SNAR](#) [KIPR](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#) [US](#)

SUBJECT: Turkmenistan's Very Public Drug Burn

REF: Ashgabat 144

Summary

1. (SBU) The media, the diplomatic corps and Turkmenistan's State Counternarcotics Commission at the Cabinet of Ministers witnessed the incineration of 562 kilograms of narcotics, primarily seized along the border with Afghanistan from December 2006 through early February, on February 7. This, the fourth such event in the last two years, was more of a media event than in the past, but less of an overall spectacle for the diplomatic corps. The February 7 drug burn was the first time drug seizure statistics were publicly announced in the state run newspaper and broadcast on the state run television news program. The newspaper article reported that more than 89 kilograms of hashish were also burned, although this was not announced during the drug burn. Significantly, the Reuters Senior Correspondent for Central Asia, accredited to Turkmenistan, was also on hand for the event. End Summary.

Something Old

2. (U) The diplomatic corps, mostly composed of resident chiefs of mission, were greeted by Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov as they gathered in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to join a convoy of vehicles headed out to the drug burn site. Diplomatic missions were invited to the event only two days prior, but many were represented. Also joining the group was a government bus for journalists. Two scientists working with post's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) on-going forensic laboratory project, a Customs Deputy Minister working with INL on an English-language project for law enforcement officials, the First Deputy Chairman of the State Border Service who participated in the Altyn Asyr border crossing checkpoint opening and a number of INL meetings, and the Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court who previously attended a USG-funded rule of law conference also attended.

3. (U) At the site, it was business as usual when three young police officers wearing battle fatigues, Kevlar helmets,

bullet-proof vests and protective goggles, but notably no gloves, opened the armored vehicle that housed the 513 kilograms of opium, 49 kilograms of heroin and 89 kilograms of hashish to be tossed into the two incinerators. Deputy Chief of the State Counternarcotics Commission at the Cabinet of Ministers Yalim Berdiyev (who had met with the Adams Assistance delegation on February 2, reftel), during an interview near the incinerators, told reporters that a majority of the drugs being destroyed were seized on the border with Afghanistan while a minority portion was seized along the border with Iran. There were a number of local photo journalists, reporters and diplomats photographing all stages of the burn. Poloff saw that one portion of the drugs to be burned was packaged in English-language "Maxwell House" labels.

Something New

14. (SBU) Several local journalists had been included in previous burns, but this burn was broadcast on the February 7 state-controlled national evening news and an article on the event, including seizure statistics, was published in the national state paper on February 8, both firsts. The government also invited the Reuters journalist to the event, representing both international and independent reporting. This first burn of 2007 continued the tradition of hosting the invited observers to an incinerator-side meal, but (thankfully) absent the previous mandatory vodka toasts.

Comment

15. (SBU) The media-saturated burn follows on the heels of the EUR/ACE delegation's visit and comments to government officials on

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the need for transparent drug-seizure information. It also comes on the eve of the February 11 presidential elections, and projects Acting President and presidential candidate Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's commitment both to the international war on drugs and in particular to combating drug trafficking through Turkmenistan.

16. (SBU) It was Deputy Chief Berdiyev's first time to host a drug burn and thus meet with much of the diplomatic corps. Berdiyev, the former government point of contact for a USG-funded border-crossing checkpoint project, was a forthcoming interlocutor with poloff at the event, although he appeared uncomfortable talking to other diplomats or the media. Thanks to INL and embassy programs, poloff was one of the few diplomats at the drug burn able to boast long familiarity with the Turkmenistan officials hosting the event. The burn proved an uncommon opportunity to reinforce the U.S. Government's commitment to Turkmenistan's counternarcotics efforts. End Comment.

BRUSH